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FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9147
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 001454

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN FALEOMAVAEGA PROMOTES STRONGER TIES,
EDUCATIONAL AID

¶1. Summary. Building stronger relations through educational, economic, and agricultural cooperation were key themes of Congressman Eni Faleomavaega's visit to Cambodia from November 22 to ¶24. During an informal dinner, Congressman Faleomavaega, Delegate from American Samoa and Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment, told Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Ouch Borith that he supported more U.S. scholarships for Cambodians and an increased American role in Cambodian education. In a very cordial meeting, Commerce Minister Cham Prasidh and Chairman Faleomavaega talked about the economic challenges common to American Samoa and Cambodia as small geographic areas, Cambodia's recovery from its tragic past, directions for Cambodia's economic development, and compared cultural notes. End Summary.

Faleomavaega: Education, Agriculture as Tools for Stronger Relations

¶2. Expressing his desire for relations between the U.S. and Cambodia to become "stronger," Chairman Faleomavaega focused on potential ways to improve relations with Cambodia during an informal dinner with Ouch Borith, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Borith enthusiastically agreed with Faleomavaega's suggestion of expanding educational opportunities in the U.S. for Cambodian students. Borith noted that many Cambodian students have difficulty studying in the U.S. due to student visa denials and the high cost of American education. Congressman Faleomavaega offered to look at ways to create educational opportunities for Cambodian students, including: using a burden-sharing arrangement to jointly establish U.S.-Cambodian government scholarships for study in the U.S.; increasing Peace Corps presence in Cambodia; and offering English training via television with the assistance of University of California educators. Chairman Faleomavaega also suggested the two countries review ways to apply American agricultural expertise to Cambodia, prompting Borith to suggest that organic farming may be a niche that Cambodia could develop in the regionally competitive agriculture industry.

Commerce Minister: Cambodia Moving Beyond Its Tragic Past

¶3. During his meeting with Chairman Faleomavaega, Commerce Minister Cham Prasidh emphasized Cambodia's efforts to move beyond its turbulent history, noting that Cambodians "had saluted six flags in six decades." While the government is working hard to put the country back on its feet, he said, it has been difficult as only 4.5 million people remained after the Khmer Rouge regime: Cham Prasidh himself was one of only 64 intellectuals to survive in Cambodia. The U.S. and Cambodia have had a long relationship, the Commerce

Minister noted, but the U.S. sometimes misunderstood Cambodia. He lamented that Vietnam's assistance to Cambodia following the Khmer Rouge regime branded the country communist. Had wealthier Thailand come to help, Prasidh mused, Cambodia would not have had such a negative label. However, he said, "When you are drowning, you don't look to see what kind of hand is reaching to help you." Prasidh noted with satisfaction that U.S.-Cambodian relations have grown closer in recent years.

¶4. Turning to Cambodia's development progress and needs, the Commerce Minister proudly briefed Congressman Faleomavaega on Cambodia's groundbreaking labor programs, including garment factory monitoring and the labor arbitration council, both of which were created under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor and are now funded by USAID and other donors. In agriculture, Prasidh noted that while other developing countries are looking to genetically modified crops, Cambodia wants to promote organic farming instead.

¶5. Education is also a priority, he asserted, and Cambodia is investing in constructing many schools. However, he said, some families are so poor that their children must work in the fields, missing classes held during the day. If schools were electrified, poor students could study at night when their work was completed. Econoff described the recently announced DOL child labor grant and its emphasis on reaching children working in subsistence agriculture. The Commerce Minister also stated that he would welcome an expansion of Peace Corps' presence in Cambodia and favored efforts to build up Cambodia's education system rather than relying on educating Cambodians overseas.

Comment

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¶6. Chairman Faleomavaega's positive meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Ouch Borith and Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh, as well as a memorable weekend viewing the Water Festival and Angkor Wat, have begun a stronger relationship between one of the House's few Asian-American members and Cambodia. Indeed, Congressman Faleomavaega seemed truly disappointed to learn that Prasidh had been unable to secure a meeting with him when he was last in Washington, and promised not only to meet with Prasidh during his next trip but also to learn about the proposed New Partnership for Development Act on trade with least developed countries and to reach out to Cambodian-American statesman Sichan Siv.

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